

Songs as a Magic Tonic

By Ignatius N. Sibarah

Learners of a foreign language must participate throughout the learning process. This is especially true for learning English as a foreign language in bilingual Cameroon. Situations in which learners are inactive while teachers expound on linguistic theories never bode well for effective learning. Rather than being stifled, the classroom atmosphere should be sufficiently relaxed so learners are not frightened of speaking. This article discusses a technique for relaxing the classroom atmosphere and motivating students by using songs.

In a country like Cameroon, where English is spoken by a minority, experience has shown that the majority of the French-speaking community, more often than not, adopts a disquieting, nonchalant, and uncaring attitude toward learning English. Thus, Francophone pupils in English language classes already have English-phobia.

The onus of ensuring effective learning in such a situation rests solely on the instructor's shoulders, and it becomes necessary for the instructor to draw upon his/her warehouse of professional resources. The instructor also has to rekindle interest in uninterested and uncooperative students before beginning any task. Thus, when I found myself confronted with these obstacles, I concluded that until learners' interests are sufficiently aroused, teaching English to Francophone pupils will remain a difficult task.

Sample Lesson

In my experience, the language classroom should be a place where gaiety abounds, not a prison where learners sit passively subjected to an overbearing, domineering, "all-knowing," pedantic teacher. Thus, to woo students to English language classes, I began to use songs as a magic tonic. This relaxed the classroom atmosphere sufficiently for learning to take place. However, songs, like other activities, should be included in your lesson plan only when they promote a defined course objective.

The following is an example of how I used a song to teach a specific lesson from our textbook used in Francophone secondary schools in Cameroon.

MAIN THEME: Days of the Week

LESSON OBJECTIVE: By the end of this lesson, learners should be able to say and write the days of the week; use and understand today and tomorrow; use and understand before and after.

This is what the text's authors would like taught. The accompanying teachers' book gives us a ready methodology to use.

Some teachers think that using the authors' suggested methodology ensures effective learning. However, in rural Cameroon, where students are apathetic about learning English and where

more than two-thirds of the pupils do not have the prescribed textbook, following the teachers' book only succeeds in reducing effective teaching. In this challenging situation, I immediately jolted my creative faculties. Rather than using the teachers' book, I decided to use lyrical bits to motivate my uninterested students.

Procedures

1. On my portable chalkboard with the student's timetable, days of the week are written in English. Since weekends are free days, I glued pictures of the local market and the local church on the spaces provided for Saturday and Sunday, respectively. I added other things to the other days.

2. I read out the names of the days. While the students repeated, I checked for and corrected pronunciation errors. By recognising the subjects attributed to each day and seeing the market and church indicating Saturday and Sunday, the pupils understood the days of the week without so much as a whispered hint from me.

3. To retain my students' interest, I displayed a second portable board with a song about the days of the week. Life instantly rushed to their somber faces. The song is

I come to school on Monday,
Tuesday and Wednesday,
Thursday and Friday.
I come to school these days.
Good-bye to you, teacher,
Good-bye to you, sister,
Good-bye to you, brother,
It's time for me to go.
Saturday and Sunday,
Saturday and Sunday,
Is time for me to rest.

I use this popular nursery school jingle on Fridays to teach several grammatical lessons. I use this song to teach personal and object pronouns by substituting I with you, he, she, we, and they. I make flashcards on which I print the personal pronouns, and whenever a card is held up, the pupils make the appropriate changes.

With such substitutions, students are very quick to notice the changes occurring on lines 8 and 11 where the object pronouns are used. Secondly, the song helps students remember the simple present. When I is substituted with he, she, or a name, the verb needs an "s":

He comes to school on Monday.

At times, I use flash cards with the names of my students. They are greatly flattered when their names become part of a song. What is interesting in this game is that students insert these changes as they sing, and I follow the singing with my long stick pointing to the lines on the

board. If they make a mistake, I keep on tapping my stick on the same line until they make the correct change.

For vocabulary, students are also obliged to learn new lexical items outside of what the text has. They learn some words through hand gestures, such as the meaning of good-bye. The lexical items before, after, today, and tomorrow, I can also teach by using the song. Finally, I can stress word order with this simple song. By doing the above, I have satisfied the text objectives and motivated my students.

Feedback

After spicing up my lessons with this technique for one academic year, the result has been positive. When I first arrived at my rural school, I noticed that during English lessons more than two-thirds of the class was permanently outside. But the situation changed dramatically when I started teaching English spiced with these songs.

Nowadays, I do not need the tolling bell to announce the beginning of the English period. As soon as the mathematics teacher, who precedes me, finishes and I step into the classroom, my students start singing our latest song. After allowing them to sing, I ask them questions about grammatical or lexical items in the song. There is always a scramble to answer my questions.

If I am delayed in the staff room, a crowd of protesting students immediately comes to inform me that time is passing. So no pupil wants to miss 90 minutes with the English teacher, alias choirmaster.

Conclusion

Textbook objectives become even more interesting when revised to suit specific classroom realities. I fervently believe in Zofia Chlopek's article (Forum, July 1995) which states that "...it is really not necessary to stick to an old, orderly syllabus." I also concur with Williams (1983), who feels that "the textbook will continue to play an important role, but it will not be a tyrant." So to add variety to my lessons, I consult the shelves of my memory for themes to adapt into songs that help me present language points and add fun and relaxation to my lessons.

This system of spicing the language meals I serve with songs has endeared me to my pupils and has distanced me and English from its negative reputation. Thus, my magic tonic remains songs, songs, and nothing but songs since I now consider singing to be a necessary ingredient in my English class.

References

Chlopek, Z. 1995. The importance of the beginning. English Teaching Forum, 33, 3, pp. 52–53.

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